

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 134

By Whitson

A RESOLUTION to recognize the suicidal health crisis at the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge.

WHEREAS, suicide is one of the most disruptive and tragic events a family and a community can experience, and each year, more than 1,000 lives are lost to suicide in Tennessee, with an estimated eight to twenty-five attempted suicides for each suicide death; and

WHEREAS, suicide is the ninth-leading cause of all deaths in Tennessee, the second-leading cause of death among youth ages ten to twenty-four, and the first-leading cause for children ages ten to seventeen; three lives a day are lost to suicide in Tennessee, which means we lose twenty-two Tennesseans each week and ninety-seven per month; and

WHEREAS, at least thirty-two suicide deaths from jumping from the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge have been reported since 2000; twenty-nine were Tennessee residents, and the remaining were residents of South Carolina and Virginia. Five of these suicide deaths from the bridge were reported in 2017, and three were reported in 2018; and

WHEREAS, public awareness of the role that the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge has in this tragic problem is the key to preventing further suffering and loss of life; the risk for human self-destruction can be reduced through awareness, education, and treatment, as the highest risk for suicide is among the survivors of those who died by suicide or those who have attempted suicide; and

WHEREAS, the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge is located in Williamson County, spanning Tennessee Highway 96 and Birdsong Hollow, and is 1,572 feet long and 155 feet above the pavement below; construction of the bridge was completed in October 1993, and the bridge was opened to traffic in March 1994; and

WHEREAS, the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge falls under federal jurisdiction with the National Park Service, and four National Park Service rangers patrol 444 miles of parkway across three states; via a 2017 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the National Park Service, the Williamson County Sheriff's Office may now respond to incidents at the bridge; and

WHEREAS, in 2009, Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network (TSPN) worked with the National Park Service to place signs with "1-800-273-TALK (8255)" and "tspn.org" at each end of the bridge; the signage was installed in October 2010, and zero suicides were reported between then and September 2013; and

WHEREAS, no additional safety measures have been taken since 2010; TSPN has continued to work with the National Park Service to add cellular call boxes, but the park service rejected any other requests for a barrier/netting, cameras, and better signage, even in light of the fact that the Williamson County Sheriff's Office now allocates daily resources to monitoring the bridge and that deputies respond routinely to suicide attempts at the bridge; and

WHEREAS, the official position of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) in 2008, updated in 2017, is that the use of bridge barriers is the most effective means of bridge suicide prevention; Lifeline is unable to recommend cost-saving mechanisms, such as bridge phones, as barriers are the most effective, empirically validated course of action in preventing suicides from bridges, while phones and signage are only supplemental to bridge barriers; and

WHEREAS, the Natchez Trace Bridge Barrier Coalition was formed in 2018 by Trish Merelo, after the loss of her son, and Sarah Elmer, after the loss of her sister, and has partnered with Centerstone and the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network with the mutual goal of adding a protective barrier and/or netting critical to saving lives;

WHEREAS, the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge too frequently serves as lethal means in a suicidal crisis; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE

CONCURRING, that we hereby recognize the suicidal health crisis at the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge and fully support our federal delegation in their efforts to rectify this hazard to public safety by encouraging and working with the National Park Service to erect barriers on the portion of the bridge above State Highway 96.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that a certified copy of this resolution be transmitted to the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and the Department of Health.